The Role of Franciscan Theology in Secondary Education

There are, I would argue, three significant areas in which the teaching of Franciscan theology in Catholic or other Christian secondary-schools would be beneficial; and there are three particular Franciscan concepts which apply, namely: Scotus’ doctrine of the Primacy of Christ; the concept of relationality, and the concept of *haecceitas*. After addressing these issues, I will also talk briefly about a project on which I am working, which aims to present Franciscan views to primary-school aged children.

The first issue that crops up frequently at a secondary level revolves around students’ views of humanity’s place in the world. There are two views that are fairly common in my experience, both of which I would argue are lacking in one way or the other. Firstly, there is the ‘traditional’ anthropocentric Christian view, which sees humanity as the pinnacle of and reason for the existence of Creation, and which sees animals and all of nature as existing almost entirely for our benefit. Recently, I was struck anew by the lack of love and understanding inherent in this view, when a Christian friend commented to me that it was specifically her Christian faith that made her reject veganism; her belief was that we have dominion over the animals, and that they are there for our use. Her assertion that animals have little to no intrinsic worth seemed profoundly sad to me, as she was missing out on the beauty and goodness of Creation.

Humanity’s place in the universe is already addressed to an extent in secondary level education, but I would argue that the teaching would be greatly enhanced by a consideration of the doctrine of the Primacy, of St Francis’ belief in the relatedness of all creatures, and of the concept of *haecceitas*.

Firstly, offering students the view that the universe exists for the sake of Christ would help to shift the anthropocentric, even arrogant view that the whole universe exists for us. Students need to have the opportunity to consider what it
means to say that Christ was “before the foundation of the world,”¹ that he is “the Alpha and the Omega,”² and that “he is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.”³ Crucially, they need to consider the idea that “all things have been created through him and for him.”⁴

Students could be helped to take this even further, by delving into what the meaning of the Hebrew term da’bar and the Greek term Logos really mean in scripture. Da’bar means both ‘word’ and ‘event or happening.’ When God speaks, therefore, there is an event; something is created: “God said, Let there be light.” The term Logos of course connects beautifully; Jesus is the Word who is spoken by God before all things; he is the Word through whom all Creation comes to exist. The universe, the cosmos, is therefore ‘Christified.’ It is created through the Word, Christ, and it is saturated with reason, order, truth, and beauty, with God’s Wisdom; and it shares with the Incarnate Word a material nature. A dismissive attitude towards the material universe, created by an emphasis on the value only of humanity, is a failure to recognise both the sacredness of the cosmos, and the centrality of Christ to all existence.

In short, the doctrine of the Primacy would help students to understand that animals and all of nature do not exist purely for our benefit.

The second Franciscan idea that would aid in countering this mistaken view of humanity’s status is of course St Francis’ belief that all creatures – and not only all humans - are Brothers and Sisters, as seen especially in his Canticle. The Canticle, sometimes regarded merely as a hymn to nature, rather shows the relational nature of our existence as God’s creatures, and praises the Father who has created all things. By studying the Canticle, students can become familiar with the idea that all creatures are Brothers and Sisters, and that non-human animals, and all aspects of nature, are far from having merely instrumental value for humans. They could be offered the opportunity to meditate on St Francis’

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¹ Ephesians 1:4
² Revelation 1:8, 21:6, 22:13
³ Colossians 1:15
⁴ Colossians 1:16
words to Lady Poverty when she asked him to show her his friary, when he took her to the top of a mountain and said with an expansive gesture, “This, Lady, this is our Friary.”

The veganism against which my friend was arguing is, however, sometimes an example of the second mistaken view of humanity’s place in the universe, this being the view that the suffering of any sentient being is of the same moral value – either because no things have objective moral value, or because all things are fundamentally one in essence, and have equal moral value. Materialism, liberalism, pantheism, and veganism: each in their own way often denies the dignity and sacredness of humanity, seeing humans as ‘just another kind of animal’ – and each is a fairly common view among students, though they do not always label them as such.

Currently, the concept of the sanctity of human life is taught throughout the RE curriculum, and there is obviously no shortage of Church teaching laying out this key belief. I would argue, however, that the belief in the sanctity of human life is not paired fully enough with the Franciscan view of the sanctity of all life; and this sometimes makes it easier for non-Christians to dismiss it. The perception is that Christianity values only human life, and so, intuitively recognising the intrinsic value of the rest of nature, some find it easy to reject the Christian view. Incorporating the Franciscan vision into the teaching of RE would therefore potentially remove this perceived barrier, and encourage a deeper consideration of the Christian view of humanity by those who hold these beliefs.

The concept of haecceitas, communicating as it does the worth of each and every creature, also has an important role to play in resolving this issue. An examination of this principle would support students further in seeing both that all parts of the material universe have intrinsic value, and that there is unique worth and dignity inherent in every human being.
Elizabeth Peck

The second misunderstanding, which Franciscan theology would help to correct, concerns science and religion. Religion, and Catholicism in particular, is seen as anti-science. According to some surveys, the belief that Christianity is ‘anti-science’ is among the top reasons why people either leave or reject the faith. I have found this to be true in my own experience; over ten years of teaching Religious Education, I have heard repeatedly: “I don’t believe in God because I believe in the Big Bang,” or, “I don’t believe in God because I believe in science.” Similarly, I have taught Catholic students, and run Confirmation courses for Catholic teenagers, who believe that they are not ‘allowed’ to believe in the Big Bang theory or evolution. Experience has shown me that it is unbelievably difficult to ‘overwrite’ the belief that Catholicism teaches that Genesis must be taken literally, and it remains fixed for some students, despite the current curriculum including the topic of Creation. In my own teaching last year, when I had the opportunity to address these issues, I covered the history of the Big Bang theory, focusing of course on the fact that Georges Lemaître, the ‘father’ of the Big Bang theory, was a Catholic priest. In addition, we covered the concept of biblical criticism, and theories about the inspiration and interpretation of the Bible, and we examined Genesis 1-3 to see why biblical critics do not believe they should be taken literally. And yet, it was not enough! Still there were some students who, when asked at the end of the course, replied that Catholics believe the world was made in six days, and that Catholicism rejects the findings of science. I would like to propose that teaching the Franciscan Christocentric and relational view of the universe, with explicit reference to scholars such as Eric Doyle OFM and Zachary Hayes OFM, would be a very valuable addition to the educational armoury, and it would go a long way to loosening this stubborn misconception. We could say to students, “Science and biblical criticism alike show us that Genesis 1-3 shouldn’t be interpreted literally; and here’s a positive, alternative, beautiful theological perspective.”

Franciscan theology also has a pastoral rather than an academic or intellectual application. In my experience, students struggle deeply to discover and be themselves. Experience and evidence gained through running workshops on this issue has shown me that this feeling of ‘not being able to be yourself’ can cause a
great deal of suffering, often borne in silence for years. One aspect of this is that students often believe that their identity is created by their hobbies, their clothes or appearance, the music they listen to, the grades they achieve at school, or other features. They don’t know that their identity revolves around relationship, and not around meeting certain criteria. Young people in our culture today have grown up in a largely relativist, individualistic, and post-modern world, which has taught them that they create, rather than discover, who they are, and that their identity is something purely personal, individual, and isolated from society and other people. They therefore struggle with a continual feeling that they in some sense can’t be themselves, in a way which they can’t quite identify, and they try in vain to alleviate this feeling by ensuring that they’re seen conforming to expectations.

Exploring the fundamental Christian belief that we are made in the image of God, along with the three specifically Franciscan concepts already discussed, would be hugely beneficial to many students in this respect. In addition, an examination of the importance of contemplation and silence, and of a mystical worldview, would help students immensely. These ideas can aid them in living into their true identities, in the following ways:

Firstly, the idea that every individual is made in the image of a triune God, who himself is love and is in relationship within himself, can help students understand that it is through relationships that we discover and become our true selves. Just as God’s nature is essentially relational, so is ours, as we are made in God’s image; we cannot be ourselves if we are not in right relationship with others. Seamus Mullholland OFM writes of “Scotus’ foundational insight that each person is an ‘individual in relationship;” we need to share and discuss this insight with students.

This concept is strongly enhanced by the Franciscan view of all creatures being brothers and sisters. Once students have grasped that their identity is essentially relational, by considering the relational nature of the Trinity, they could be led to explore further what kinds of relationships are essential to human existence, using Franciscan theology as a framework for their thinking. They might come to
see that their identity is formed by their relationships with God, with other people, and with all creatures and all of Creation; and they might realise that to know and be themselves, it is these relationships on which they should focus.

Next, learning about the concept of *haecceitas* could show students that to be themselves, they need to fulfil their human nature while also becoming their own, unique and unrepeatable individuals. They could come to appreciate what it means to share a human nature with all people and with Christ himself, and also – just as crucially – it could help them to understand that they not only should not try to be, but cannot be, anyone else but themselves.

Once the principle of *haecceitas* has enabled students to see that they must aim to become fully human, revisiting the doctrine of the Primacy of Christ can show them more specifically what it means to be fully human. If students can internalise the idea that they are made in Christ’s image and that he is the template of all humanity, then they can see that what it means to be human is to be Christ-like. In other words, they can see that they should strive to be fully themselves by becoming fully loving, not by conforming to any particular social or worldly standard; and they would be on a much surer path to happiness.

In relation to all of this, students should learn about and experience contemplative thought and prayer, and about letting ourselves, others, and all beings, truly be. As Eric Doyle said, “Education at every level...should make it one of its basic aims to restore the sense of wonder at the beauty, mystery, and fascinating intricacy of nature.” Likewise, Mullholland writes, “The ‘this’ (*haec*) of any person is a sacred mystery known to God alone, and *haecceitas* points to the ineffable within every being.” Without contemplation and silence, students will never realise this, and so they will never see reality, including both nature and their very selves, as it really is. Encouraging silence and contemplation would allow them access to deeper truths, and to a deeper experience of their own identity; it can give them the courage and freedom to be themselves more openly, while allowing others to do the same. Without this knowledge and practice, they can remain behind the façades they’ve created - defensive, confused, and ultimately isolated.
Now, it is clear that preventing these misconceptions and issues from arising is preferable to trying to resolve them. This truism is in fact where my personal journey into Franciscan theology really began, roughly four years ago. At the time, our daughter Alethea was a few months old, and I started to think about the books I would use, to teach her about God and Creation. Having taught RE for nearly a decade, I was already aware of some key truths that I wanted her to know from the outset, so that she never developed any of the common misconceptions I spend so much of my teaching life trying to combat – including those already discussed today. As far as I could tell, there was no book that presented the creation of the universe in a narrative that was at once scientifically and theologically accurate, and so I set about writing one. The book, entitled *God Is Not A Man In The Sky*, seeks to present, through a literal narrative, the creation of the universe, starting from ‘before’ the beginning of time, and moving through the Big Bang and evolution, through the Old Testament period, and up to Jesus’ Resurrection and early Christianity. During the writing process, it became apparent that it would be very helpful to parents and teachers to have a more in-depth, but still accessible, explanation of all the ideas within the children’s book though; and so this now accompanies the children’s book. I am hopeful that the book, along with the adults’ companion guide, can be used within families, within faith formation and catechesis, and one day, hopefully in Catholic primary schools, to help prevent misconceptions about God and Creation from arising, and to give people the opportunity to embrace the beautiful and profound Franciscan ideas.5

The crucial question is, of course: how is all this to be achieved? How can the teaching of these Franciscan ideas, and the use of such materials, become a reality in parishes, and in both primary and secondary schools? We are in a Catch-22: I know from first-hand experience that Dioceses, schools and publishers reject materials such as those I have created, on the grounds that the ideas are not in line with what is currently taught in schools and parishes. Because people

5 The book, *God is Not a Man in the Sky*, including the adults’ companion guide, will be published in 2021, when the artwork has been completed. Please contact the author at lizzy.peck@hotmail.com if you would like to be notified when it becomes available.
are not familiar with the theology, they reject it; but because they reject it, no one has the chance to become familiar with it.

This is exactly the kind of question which Dr Abbott has just addressed, and I echo her views entirely. We need to introduce Franciscan theology to more people, via priests, teachers, and catechists, using all the strategies suggested. In terms of primary and secondary level education, we need to reach the point where students are offered the key Franciscan beliefs I have discussed, as their acceptance and implementation would make a very great difference in their lives.